Language, race and identity

Tope Omoniyi

... in my experience race reveals itself as plastic, inconstant, and to some extent volitional.

(Haney-López 1994: 10)

Regardless of what evidence exists for race’s biological reality, ‘race’, because it is a linguistic phenomenon – a word, an utterance – becomes a social construct when it enters the world of discourse, which it must do, of course, in order for us to communicate about it.

(Howard 2010: 1)

Introduction

The title of this chapter calls up a fundamental debate that has raged since the rise of philology and the discovery of the Indo-European language family in the late eighteenth century, concerning whether or not language and race are linked. The ‘nature versus nurture’ debate pitches those who say race is a biological fact and therefore provide genetic arguments to buttress their claim versus those who say race is a social construction in the Boasian tradition. Sapir (2003 [1921]) identifies race and culture as ‘settings’ for language. In his account, language, race and culture are the three ‘rubrics’ under which anthropologists study humankind and they are ‘not distributed in a parallel fashion’ (2003: 29). Rather, their areas of distribution intercross in the most bewildering fashion. He further notes that races intermingle differently from languages and ‘languages may spread far beyond their original home, invading the territory of new races and new culture spheres’ (ibid.). The link between language, race and identity has been in the spotlight again recently and a new field of inquiry: ‘raciolinguistics’ is even being proposed in some quarters.

This chapter seeks to examine ‘race’ as a dimension of identity in relation to language and identity studies in applied linguistics and to consider the relationship of race with language. In what follows, an overview of race is presented, followed by a number of issues and ongoing debates related to race as a construct with regard to sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.
Overview

This section presents highlights of the scholarship on race that show us that its intersections with language and identity are both evident and complex. The definition of race is contested around whether the associative properties are inherent or constructed and performed. The illustration in the subsection on ‘racial passing’ underlines this complexity as racial stereotypes are the features that are exploited. These stereotypes arose out of unsubstantiated accounts of nineteenth-century explorers and philosophers.

Haney-Lopez (1994: 165) defines race as a ‘vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or their ancestry’.

He goes further to say that it is:

neither an essence nor an illusion, but rather an on-going contradictory, self-reinforcing plastic process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decisions … the referents of terms like Black and White are social groups, not genetically distinct branches of humankind. (Ibid.)

The view of race as a social construct has been reinforced, for instance, in a number of seminal texts in sociolinguistics and education, such as Hewitt’s (1986) *White talk Black talk*, Alim and Baugh’s (2007) *Talkin Black talk* and Bucholtz’s (2011) *White kids: language, race, and styles of youth identity*.

Hartigan (2010) notes that the ways race is performed, or constructed, vary from one locale to another. This corresponds with the phenomenon that Eckert describes as style-shifting (2000; see also Coupland 1980). Hartigan (2010: 33) argues that the cultural analysis of race as performative involves three interrelated operations viz ‘body work, spatializing practices, and the determination of belonging and difference’ (Hartigan 2010: 33). All three operations involve language to varying degrees all geared towards the goal of performing race. The position articulated here is not much different from that taken by others on the subject. Howard (2010: para. 6), for instance, observes that:

Haney Lopez’s story introduces the important point that a person can ‘choose’ – or *construct* – [their] racial identity not only on a census form, but also, more notably, in the wardrobe, in the classroom, and on the streets of American cities. And, as we all know, biracial individuals are not the only ones who must construct their race in this way: a black man must perform whiteness when interviewing for a corporate job, for example, just as a white kid in an urban public school must perform blackness when changing in the locker room for gym class.

These references to performances of race are in fact only the tip of a robust scholarship that transverses a number of subjects in the social sciences, such as film and cinema studies; post-colonial studies; feminist studies; and cultural studies. As Foster (2003: 25) notes, ‘[w]hiteness as a construct was already in place at the end of the nineteenth century when photography and cinema began their respective histories’.

By ‘biracial’, we may suppose that Haney-Lopez was referring to the mixed race offspring of parents from two different racial cohorts who, as a consequence of being mixed race, have access to the signifying practices of the races of both their parents and may choose from both
repertoires as occasion demands. However, this is not straightforward. There is a subclass of people whose racial constitution involve differing degrees of hybridity. For instance, the offspring of the union of a biracial person (A+B) and another biracial person (C+D) has the racial constitution of A, B, C and D to varying degrees, and may socially signify as they choose, using repertoires of any or all of these groups. They will also be adjudged socially on an authenticity scale. Of course, we know from Bucholtz (2011) and Rampton (1995) that youths do not need such constitution per se in order to so signify, especially in the context of multilingual and multicultural urban settings. From this brief overview, we can see that the meaning of race is complex and controversial and raises a number of issues and ongoing debates. In the following section, I address a number of these issues and the complexity of settings in relation to linguistic diversity.

**Issues and ongoing debates**

The first issue to attend to is on the equality of the races. Ashcroft’s (2003) more critical treatment of the relationship between language and race is situated in the ‘marriage of linguistic hegemony and racial marginalisation’ in imperial discourse (2003: 37). He refutes the nineteenth-century categorisations and descriptions of racial types as ‘elaborate fictions, invested with an absurd amount of intellectual energy. They are an elaboration of the fictionality of language itself, the arbitrary link between signifier and signified’ (2003: 42).

The philosopher David Hume (1758) had, for instance, suggested that ‘Negroes were inferior to whites’, Africa was tagged the ‘Dark Continent’, and a ‘black–white’ binary was constructed in which ‘black’ acquired connotative properties of, among others, ugliness, filth, degradation, night and mourning while ‘white’ epitomised cleanliness, purity, beauty, virginity and peace.

But Ashcroft imbues language with agency when he asserts that it inscribes rather than describes human difference ‘through such chromatic signifiers’ (2003: 40) (in other words, colour-based associative properties), which is somewhat unsettling considering that language is a human attribute. Consequently, the preferred focus of this chapter must be on what Ashcroft referred to as ‘the reality of racial experience’, which according to him ‘centres, not in physical typology, or “community of blood” or genetic variation, but in language’ (ibid.). This reality manifests either as Renan’s linguistic races, that is, races that are only decipherable on the basis of language, exemplified by the Semitic and Aryan races, or what Ashcroft called ‘the figurative power of language in which chromatic signifiers performed the cultural work of racial “othering”’ (2003: 40). Renan (1855: 80) concluded that ‘there is just one criterion for recognising Semites, and that is language’. This distinction is somewhat different from Ashcroft’s ideologically inclined discourse-based account, which is aligned to the thought of race as a social construction subscribed to widely in the discourse of resistance in post-colonial writing.

There is a related debate that pertains to the relationship between language and culture. Some prefer to see language as a component of culture among other components by which aggregates of people may be identified. Others prefer to see language as the embodiment of culture so that the latter exists in language. This requires a broad interpretation of language that includes all manner of expressive and communicative practices, whether vocal, visual or signed. The language–culture link is more usually invoked in discussions of ethnic and ethnolinguistic identities (see Joseph, this volume; Lytra, this volume). Ethnicity is however no less problematic than race in relation to language. This point is well articulated by Hewitt (2003 [1992]) in his discussion of the roles of language and youth in the destabilisation of ethnicity. Stable, unchanging folk identities once ascribed to communities by social and cultural anthropologists have been
subjected to hybridisation or what Hannerz (1989) and Barth (1989) referred to as ‘creolisation’. Both race and ethnicity can be performatively and symbolically constructed and ascribed based on any sustained or mythical group stereotypes and stylisations. Yet, both terms are also institutionally set demographic cohort descriptors for aggregates of people who possess certain physical or physiological attributes and cultural values. For instance, distinguishing between the Masai of Kenya and the Pygmies of the Congo will entail references to the contrastive physical heights of the groups, their activities, which are conditioned by their ecological environments, and the languages they speak.

The two issues presented above are, however, not entirely discontinuous. Distinctions between various human groups (whether defined by race or ethnicity) based on their views of the world (conveyed by language) have become problematic in our increasingly multilingually and multicultural resourced and globalised lives. If language influences thought and behaviour as linguistic determinism tells us, then exposure to multiple languages must mean exposure to multiple influences. Which perspective is taken impacts on how the link between language and identity is viewed. The dilemma here is that culture is perceived as a variable in multi-ethnic as well as in multiracial societies. So, in the United States, there are references to ‘Black culture’, and these are set in contrast to the cultural practices of White, Hispanic, Asian and Native Americans. Similarly, in the UK, and increasingly across the nation states of the European Union whose populations have been diversified through post-colonial migration, multiracialism has resulted in the identification of stereotyped language practices for different groups. These stereotypes inform TV programmes like Desi Rascals (Sky Living), My Big Fat Gypsy Grand National (Channel 4 Television, UK) and so on, and romanticise folk identities. As Haney-Lopez (2000: x) reminds us: ‘Human interaction rather than natural differentiation must be seen as the source and the continued basis for racial categorization.’ Arguably, the fact that it takes immigrants who cross racial borders a while to shift from invoking ethnic to racial identity supports Haney-Lopez’s placement of premium on interaction (see Ibrahim 2003). Next, what are the sociolinguistics’ and applied linguistics’ stakes in these debates?

Sociolinguistics

Interest in the relationship between language and race in sociolinguistic and applied linguistic scholarship is primarily a consequence of human mobility on a significant scale that has created zones of racial and language contact and pluralism. In contrast, interest in language and race in anthropology had been driven by the desire to identify and describe communities of people as discrete sociocultural groups. Thus, it is not surprising that the departure from folk identification has been championed by sociolinguistics. Perhaps the largest human mobility with visible language impact (i.e. Caribbean creoles and African American Vernacular English) is the slave trade, which moved 11 million Africans through the Middle Passage to the Americas and Europe (BBC 2015).

History may show that inter-racial encounters existed before large-scale slavery, but sociolinguistics as a discipline emerging in the first half of the twentieth century can only engage with that past in retrospection through secondary data. This is possible because language and race constitute an interface for observing the structuring of society. So, for example, the Greco-Roman empires were marked by what today are clearly ethno-national encounters but at the time were conceptualised as racial encounters.

Wolfram’s study of social dialects in Detroit English is a classic study that examines the relationship between language and race. Wolfram’s (1969: xiii) discussion of the social setting for
linguistic diversity in this study isolated three factors – patterns of migration; racial isolation; and social status (all of which are arguably interconnected) – as follows:

1 Patterns of in-migration: Wolfram examined the distribution of residents of Detroit according to whether they were born in or outside Michigan. He made the intriguing observation that 68 per cent of the 10–14-year-olds in the Negro population had been born in Michigan compared to 83 per cent of the same age cohort for the White population. However, among those aged 45–49, only 5 per cent of the Negro population had been born in Michigan compared to 41 per cent of the White population in the same age cohort. Thus, the majority of the adult Negro population had migrated to Michigan having been born in outlying states like Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Arkansas and Tennessee, among others.

2 Racial isolation: Detroit City was racially segregated, with people racially marked by what part of the city they lived in – Inner City (East/West), Middle City and Outer City. Wolfram discovered that the Inner City and Middle City had a 75 per cent and 67 per cent Negro population respectively, while the Outer City was a White community with a 1 per cent Negro population. The same pattern of racial isolation was recorded for school enrolment. According to the United States Commission on Civil Rights (cited in Wolfram 1969: 29), in 1965 70 per cent of the Negro children attended schools in which the school population was 90–100 per cent Negro.

3 Social status: four social classes were delineated – Upper-Middle, Lower-Middle, Upper-Working and Lower-Working class – using fairly sophisticated methodological tools that involved calculations based on the variables of educational qualification, income and housing type. Wolfram reported that out of 40 per cent of the city’s population that was classified as Upper-Middle and Lower-Middle class, the Negro population represented less than 1.5 per cent.

All three variables taken together enable us to identify non-standard Negro speech as one of ‘racial isolation’. According to Wolfram (1969: 21), over a 20-year span Detroit transformed drastically with the exodus of its White population into the suburbs and the in-migration of a slightly larger population of Afro Americans. This movement accounted for the transformation of the sociolinguistic landscape by the time Wolfram and Shuy carried out their studies in the 1960s and 1970s. The confluence of ethnicity and economics-engendered social classification produced a hybrid community. Wolfram distinguished between Non-Standard Negro speech, which had emotive overtones, and Black English, which captured the racial pride in the Black community of the late 1960s.

Another classic study of the relationship between language and race is Hewitt’s (1986) study of Black British talk in the United Kingdom. Hewitt’s was not the first study of Black talk in the UK, but the others that preceded it were unambiguously tagged West Indian or Jamaican. For instance, Wells (1973) studied West Indians’ assimilation of the features of the vernacular variety of London English as a sociolinguistic strategy deployed to reduce the burden of racial difference on the group. Elsewhere, Edwards (1986) adopted a sociolinguistics of literacy education perspective that ascribed a West Indian racial identity to members of the Black population in the UK. We can safely say mainstream Black identity at the time of Hewitt’s and Edwards’ studies, and Black Britain as a referential group, were mainly synonymous with people of West Indian (primarily Jamaican/Caribbean) extraction. Edwards (ibid.) devotes a chapter in her book Language in a black community to issues like attitudes to ‘West Indian speech’, ‘interference
or influence’ and ‘sociology of language’, all from the perspective of a variety of spoken English described by its speakers as ‘patwa’ or ‘patois’ (i.e. Jamaican Creole). Here is an exhortation for an illustration of the language: ‘Dem a stop me and say, “We bring you over here fi h’educate you, a learn a fi speak better”, and all this kind of thing. Well, me used to listen to dem, but after dem gone, me used to speak the same’ (ibid.: 105).

Jamaican Creole is represented as central to West Indian identity in the UK before ethnicity accommodated the notion of language ‘crossing’ (Rampton 1995). The practice of language crossing, and other practices of a linguistically and ethnically diverse youth in urban areas, contributed to the shift in the sociolinguistics of identity that de-emphasised racial binaries like ‘White versus Black’, ‘Black versus Asian’ and ‘Black British African versus Black British West Indian’ and the emergence in its place of a paradigm that suited the multiculturalism project from the mid-1980s onwards – the birth of ‘new ethnicities’ (Hall 1989; Rampton 1995, 2006; Harris and Rampton 2003; Harris 2006). In what follows, I shall present a number of case studies from the last half-century or so that illustrate this shift in thinking about the relationship between language and race to demonstrate how these dimensions of identity work.

In Hyland and Paltridge’s (2011) *The Bloomsbury companion to discourse analysis*, Lin and Kubota contributed a review of a number of analytical paradigms for investigating the role of discourse in the process of racialisation, which put the spotlight on what they identify as ‘intellectual milestones’ (p. 277). The treatment of language and race in the sociolinguistic literature however is not confined in focus to racism discourses (see Baxter, this volume, for a discussion on discourse). In fact, before the discourse analytic approach became popular in the last quarter of the twentieth century, language and race had been established in anthropological linguistics and linguistic anthropology under what now seems to be a flawed ‘one race, one language’ precept, in which researchers described language behaviour and constructed cultural grammars of racial groups.

In examining the link between language and race as a dimension of identity, context is a crucial factor. There are several key contexts that a sociolinguistic or applied linguistic paradigm must consider, three of which are immigration, popular culture and education. All three of these can and have been explored through the prism of language and race. There are two additional strands in this discussion:

1. **Descriptive analysis of ‘speech style’ or language behaviour by which Black racial stereotypes were constructed:** this was the approach that was preferred in the mid-twentieth century by sociolinguists who were preoccupied with describing the variety of English spoken by Afro Americans. These speech styles were socio-economically and regionally distributed and drew on work in anthropology on ‘slave talk’. The focus was on grammar rather than sociolinguistic variables. The contemporary sociolinguistic application of this form of descriptive analysis is in linguistic profiling.

2. **In the educational sector, teaching and learning language skills necessitated by migration, and sociolinguistic scales and resources – bilingual education programmes targeted at immigrant communities such as those for children from English as an Additional Language (EAL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) backgrounds.**

At the core of the first strand is the conflict and tension generated by the treatment of the language spoken by African Americans as a substandard dialect of English rather than as a language in its own right. In other words, there is an articulation of language and race as a rights issue. Arguably, there is political expediency in extending such recognition to Ebonics, the term for
Tope Omoniyi

a variety of language used by Afro Americans in the United States. While African American English may be a dialect of mainstream Standard American English, the articulation of Ebonics as indigenous to Black America made the country multiracial and multilingual. Ebonics is no more similar to English than the Scandinavian languages are similar to each other, but the latter are assigned to different nations and tagged as separate languages. The difference is in the parameters of tagging sought for the former: racial rather than national identity. The second strand is closely related to the first but specialised in its focus on the educational sector. This plays out across various contexts of language education and language in education.

In his foreword to Sutcliffe’s (1992) *System in Black language*, Figueroa notes that the assignment of race to language suggested by ‘Black Language’, ‘Black English’, ‘Black English Vernacular’ or Hewitt’s (1986) seminal text *White talk Black talk* ‘sounds unacceptably genetic’ as though that kind of language is ‘passed down through the genes’ (Figueroa 1992: ix). By extension, the edited volume of *Black linguistics* (Makoni et al. 2003) similarly suggests a form of gene-based science of language. While the language forms described in these works may not in reality be genetically transmitted, socialisation restricts them to the communities in which they are observed and thus appear to be racially exclusive. In a similar vein, Labov (1972: xiii) differentiates between ‘Black English’ and ‘Black English Vernacular’. The former was synonymous with ‘Nonstandard Negro English’, which was a stigmatised variety in that it was contrasted with Standard American English and focused on the use of non-standard grammar as the basis of racial identification.

Figueroa remarked that racists of another era operating within the race–language framework had said that ‘Black People’ could not pronounce certain European phonemes because of the size of their lips. Drawing on Ashcroft’s (2003) plea with post-colonial intellectuals, it is important to realise that language in and of itself has no race. As Ashcroft contends:

> It is not just advisable but crucial that post-colonial intellectuals realise that language has no race, for the consequence of this link – when it leads to the rejection of tools of discursive resistance such as the English Language – has been to imprison resistance in an inward looking world. The ultimate consequence of the belief that language embodies race is the deafening silence of a rage that cannot be heard.

*(Ibid.: 51)*

The positions articulated above on the link between language and race have informed extensive scholarship in literary studies and cultural studies, as well as other related disciplines. In sociolinguistics, a version of that discussion has been couched in the debate around Chomskyan linguistic universals and the emergence of dominant propositions of difference and diversity (see Harris and Rampton 2003). Sociolinguistics has introduced more finely defined contexts or configurations of identity into the debate beyond race with a focus on discursive practice rather than on language per se. Along this line, and crucially for the discussion in this chapter, Johnstone (2010: 29) posed a fundamental question: ‘How do linguistic forms and patterns come to be associated with identities?’ In answering this question we are not only establishing the interconnection between race and language, but, as it were, we are locating language in identity.

There are two dimensions to the relationship between language and race as a dimension of identity. In one dimension, bi/multilingual linguistic resources are used to evoke or construct an individual’s identity. In relation to racial identity, Johnstone (2010) lists four language-related concepts: indexicality (signifying), reflexivity (cause and effect), metapragmatics (discourse of language use) and enregisterment (language and social valuation) (see also Agha 2003, 2005). In
a second dimension, interest in language and race in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics has also arisen as a consequence of human mobility on a large scale resulting in racial contact and diversity. This interest has focused on describing the linguistic practices of groups as opposed to individuals, which comes to inform the formulation of social policies designed to manage contexts of racial diversity. The dynamics of multiracial societies, especially within the liberal democratic project, foreground issues of equality, social justice, and human rights. ‘Difference and Diversity’ paradigm in the ‘language-has-no-race’ camp since ‘difference’ and ‘diversity’ are articulated as properties of human society sociologically and politically speaking.

The multidimensional nature of the task of tracking a trajectory like the one above is not in doubt. First, in order to talk about ‘language, race and identity’, we require a multiracial society frame (Goffman 1967). Multiracial countries may have followed different historical trajectories. For instance, the narratives of multiracialism in the United States, Britain, Brazil, South Africa, Australia, Germany and Sweden, among others, have emerged from different socio-historical processes of displacement resulting from slavery, colonisation, political, ethnic and religious conflicts and natural disasters, as well as general migration. The different experiences in the formation of multiracial societies have arguably caused differences in the nature of the relationship between language, race and identity in the various polities. Second, the relationship is observable in the institutional discourses deployed in the administration of multiracial societies, in inter-group and interpersonal relations.

Following from the two assumptions above, multiracial nation states have evolved as a definite consequence of the acquisitive and expansionist programmes pursued largely by Europeans during the period of colonialism. The expansionist framework included, for instance, the slave trade as a mechanism of Europe’s industrial revolution, and other seemingly legitimate trading activities that culminated in colonisation. These processes account for ‘Black America’, ‘Black Britain’, ‘White Australia’ and ‘White South Africa’. Perhaps in the forefront of concerns in these societies is racial prejudice; hence a large body of scholarship has emerged on racism discourse (van Dijk 1987), as I indicated earlier. The identity focus of this scholarship concerns representations of racial groups based on constructed stereotypes. The discourse is perpetuated at individual and institutional levels and it perpetuates institutional racism. For example, the ‘Stop and Search’ policy of the Metropolitan Police Force in London allegedly targets black youths. In addition, the Macpherson Report described as institutional racism the perversion of justice in the trial that followed the stabbing to death of Stephen Lawrence, a Black teenager by five White youths in 1993. The successful management of racial contact is determined more or less by the extent to which prejudice is reduced or eliminated. The sociolinguistic phenomenon of language crossing (Rampton 1995, 2006) and the emergence of Multicultural London English (Kerswill 2011) may be cited as visible sociolinguistic consequences of inter-racial harmony in an urban context.

In the education sector in multilingual and multiracial nations or societies, language policy and planning as instruments of nation-state administration offer contexts for the examination of the language and race interface. In this regard, the conflict resolution that underlies multiple official languages of the South African government is a case in point. Caution must be exercised not to conflate ethnicity and race in this instance. While there is a Black/White/Coloured racial divide in South Africa that allows us to demarcate immigrant European from indigenous African languages, there is also multiethnicity on which basis diversity programmes and projects are fashioned.

So far I have discussed conceptualisations of language and race in old and new scholarship with a focus on the associative characteristics of racial groups. In the next section, I turn to applied linguistics scholarship to explore the issues that arise around language, race and group identities.
Applied linguistics

In this section, I turn to educational and other professional contexts to examine the interaction of language, race and identity and to focus the discussion more fully on applied linguistics. There is an Applied Linguistics strand that focuses on language learning in the X-Language as an Additional Language community (such as English as an Additional Language, French as an Additional Language, German as an Additional Language and, more recently, Mandarin as an Additional Language). Additional language education has arisen in contexts of migration as migrants attempt to settle into their adoptive environments along with issues of identity negotiation, old and new citizenships, belonging and acceptability. While migration does not change the race of those involved, their ethnicities may be redefined in the context of their adoptive nation states. However, within the school context, race and ethnicity seem to coalesce for Black immigrant children in public discourse. By this I mean, for instance, the reference to Black or Asian children in the British school system, which papers over large-scale cultural differences between children of diverse ethnic heritage, such as Indian, Nepalese, Pakistani, Bengali, Jamaican, Cameroonian, Kenyan and South African, to name a few. The following examples illustrate the link between race and language in educational contexts.

Brown versus Board of Education

Following the proposition that racial diversity is the consequence of human mobility, it is only logical that we draw our illustration from the United States of America in this chapter considering its immigrant history. Two landmark court cases are crucially significant here and will serve to elucidate the language and race link in the context of schooling. The desegregation of schools was implemented following the 14 May 1954 Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (Kansas) ruling. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren ruled that school segregation was a violation of the 14th Amendment and therefore unconstitutional. A quarter of a century later in 1979, the Martin Luther King Elementary School Children v. Ann Arbor District School Board case articulated the legitimacy of 'Black English' as a language in terms of equal language rights and also in terms of language support in the TESOL framework.

Ebonics and the Oakland School Board

Perhaps one of the most volatile links of language to race and identity in education was that initially made by the Oakland School Board in California in its Resolution of December 18, 1996. The Resolution was interpreted as granting linguistic independence to the 28,000 African American students for whom Ebonics was a ‘predominantly primary language’. The argument was that Ebonics is not a non-standard dialect of English. The controversy was eventually resolved by referendum, culminating in Proposition 2262 (Baugh 2004: 305).

The Somali community of Minnesota

Bigelow’s (2010b: 1) study of the Somali community of Minnesota had the objective to ‘connect dimensions of literacy and language learning to gendered, religious, and racialized identity’ and, in so doing, ‘offer a model for how Applied Linguists can contribute to social justice and advocacy agendas that align with the communities in which they work’ (ibid.: 2). Bigelow conducted a longitudinal study of the literacy and language learning experiences of the Somali
in the Upper Midwest United States to re-examine existing theories, determine the impact of mainstream identity-marking processes, expose blind spots, and review advocacy and social justice agendas. African migrants from non-English-speaking countries experience racialisation in their attempt to acquire the linguistic survival repertoires necessary to forge a living in the imagined North American or European adopted homeland. Language programmes are specifically packaged and targeted at a racial group or cohort. Ibrahim (2003) referred to the contexts in which Somali youths learn Black English in Ottawa as ‘a symbolic site of identification in language learning’. The account of the Somali in Minnesota presented above is similar to that reported for other immigrant and refugee groups for whom language intervention programmes have been set up (see Ibrahim 2003).

**Literacy and race in Reading, UK**

The relationship between the state and migrant communities shows signs of what Bigelow (2010a) describes as ‘minoritization’ (the subordination of minority communities in the social order). Funding cuts to the EAL programmes are often articulated as evidence of this. The *School Funding Reform: Arrangements for 2013–2014* (Department of Education, UK) effectively cut funding support for children from an English as an Additional Language background. This is similar to the slash to funds in the Oakland School Board case I referred to above. But our next example of language and race interaction has a slightly different tenor.

The front-page story by Chris Anderson of the *Reading Chronicle* (23 October 2014) in Figure 9.1 reverberates with the race-based concerns that Baratz and Shuy (1969) were contending with in *Teaching Black children to read*. Anderson’s story ran with the headline ‘White Boys Sinking to Bottom of Class: Pupils Fail to Meet Literacy Standards’. The implication is that whatever the problem may be with literacy education of the children in these studies stems from the fact of their genetic or biological identity. In the article, the Education Leader for the Reading Borough Council, John Ennis, remarked that:

> There are some schools that are really good in Reading whose Key Stage Two results are above the national average. But their phonics results are still low and it is the white working class boys that are particularly low. We have to work extra hard to ensure that they are not being negatively affected.

In the same article, Mike Edwards, a former head-teacher and field worker for the literacy charity ABC to Read, was reported as observing that:

> White working class boys have been among the lowest achievers for some time in Reading but what is concerning is that they still are. If children arrive into the educational system with no knowledge of books or stories then teachers face an uphill struggle.

There is however nothing in the *Reading Chronicle*’s story that supports the racial whiteness causality claim. In the United States, a similar problem was addressed by the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC. It produced several classic texts in the sociolinguistic literature that sought to correct misconceptions about race and language by demonstrating convincingly that what had been represented as racially homogeneous language patterns were as a matter of fact socially mediated. In the Reading story, it is possible that social classification is more complex than the Borough Council recognised. There are ethnic minority families who have
been reclassified as working class on the basis of economic indices like income and housing in the UK who may have come from lower-middle-class backgrounds in their countries of origin. They may exhibit middle-class social practices including literacy practices such as learning the rudiments of reading in pre-school years. Thus the phenomenon observed may have been misinterpreted as due to race membership solely rather than a combination of factors that include demographic history. In the United States, so-called features of Non-Standard Negro English were more representative of working-class Black speakers’ repertoire since the Black middle class tended to speak standard American English more except for pragmatic intentions in ideological contexts.

**Afrikaans as medium of instruction**

The next example of the language–race–identity link I want to cite is drawn from the Apartheid era in South Africa. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 had been flawed on a number of fronts, prominent among which was acute disinvestment in the education of Black children by the South African government. Reports show that while the government invested 644 rand on average on each White school child, it only invested 42 rand on each Black child. With increased enrolment in secondary schools in the townships, more and more Black youth were introduced to Black Consciousness philosophies. When the government introduced the incendiary policy...
of Afrikaans Medium of Instruction in 1974, it was immediately recognised as an attempt by the Apartheid regime to explore the potency of linguistic ideology and hegemony to enforce the continued domination of Black minds and lives. It was resisted vehemently, culminating in the Soweto Uprising of June 1976 in which many lives were lost.3

In the post-Apartheid era, the language–race–identity link has changed somewhat, with much more freedom for individuals to choose between languages according to their preferences and vision of life in South Africa. The investment in the 11 official languages of the country still shows evidence of inequality between them, but the difference is not one that is ideologically racially driven. Kamwangamalu’s (2003) study of programme-language allocation on the government-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation reveals lop-sidedness in resource distribution and access among the official languages, for instance. This imbalance has an effect on differences in literacy rates not only between the ethnolinguistic groups but also between White and Black South Africa. The crossover of a growing number of Black middle-class people into the English and Afrikaans-speaking-and-utilising networks is gradually eroding discrimination on the basis of race and replacing it with discrimination on the basis of class.

**Linguistic profiling**

In his seminal research on linguistic profiling which he described as ‘the auditory equivalent of visual “racial profiling”’, Baugh (2003) provides us with an illustration of the language–race–identity interface. The research revealed America’s institutional racism with its findings, which showed both discriminatory and preferential linguistic profiling by public administrators in the decisions by housing departments and other public service units. He demonstrated in his experiments using actors that responses to inquiries about housing availability correlated with the accent/dialect of the speakers.

Similarly, in the case of **Clifford v. Kentucky** (1999), from which the extract below was taken (Baugh 2003: 157), Justice Cooper of the Kentucky Supreme Court in his ruling opinion remarked that ‘an opinion that an overheard voice was that of a particular nationality or race has never before been addressed in this jurisdiction’.

Q: Okay, well, how does a Black man sound?
A: Uh, some male Blacks have a, a different sound of, of their voice. Just as if I have a different sound of my voice as Detective Birkenhauer does. I sound different than you.
Q: Okay, can you demonstrate that for the jury?
A: I don’t think that would be a fair and accurate description of the, you know, of the way the man sounds.
Q: So not all male Blacks sound alike?
A: That’s correct, yes.
Q: Okay. In fact, some of them sound like Whites, don’t they?
A: Yes.
Q: Do all Whites sound alike?
A: No sir.
Q: Okay. Do some White people sound like Blacks when they’re talking?
A: Possibly, yes.

The cross-examination above completely dislodged the essentialist logic of a language–race–identity link.
Tope Omoniyi

Linguistic passing

Racial passing entails complete and permanent renunciation of the lifestyle associated with one’s racial group for a lifestyle associated with another group in order to forge membership of the latter. Linguistic passing facilitates racial passing and is different from language crossing (Rampton 1995) or style shifting in general because it is neither temporary nor momentary. While style shifting is a communicative strategy in interpersonal and intra-group relations, the norm in linguistic passing is for members of a less privileged racial group to attempt to acquire membership of a more privileged racial group surreptitiously through permanent style change. Until the case of Rachel Dolezal, Professor of Africana Studies at East Washington University in the United States, dominant racial group members were not known to desire to pass as members of a dominated racial group through the use of signifying practices that included language. To illustrate this case of passing, I have included three extracts from YouTube on the Rachel Dolezal controversy for analysis. Extract 1 is from an interview by KXLY4’s Jeff Humphrey on her parentage. The interviewer is trying to get her to substantiate the relationship between her and the African American man she appeared with in a photo whom she had described as her dad.

Extract 1

Interviewer: Is that your dad?
Rachel: Yeah, that’s, that’s my dad.
Interviewer: This man right here is your father? Right there?
00:10
Rachel: Do you have a question about that?
Interviewer: Yes ma’am, I was wondering if your dad really is an African American man.
Rachel: That’s a very, I mean I don’t know what you’re implying.
00:21
Interviewer: Are your parents, are they White?
End of interview inaudible, interview ends abruptly.

Note in this interview clip that Rachel does not provide an answer to the direct question ‘Are you African American?’; instead, she exits the interview. She affirms that the African American man in the photo is her father in response to the interviewer’s question. The dysfluency marked by her repetition of ‘that’ in that response may be indicative of hesitation to flout the Gricean maxim of quality, which forbids an interlocutor from saying something they know to be false. When the interviewer repeated the question repeating ‘right here’ to clear any doubts of whom he was requesting her to identify, she counter-challenges him to be bald on record. The interviewer’s two final questions are exactly that. Passing is attempted here through initial affirmation, and then daring the interviewer.

The second extract is from the transcript of a lecture that Rachel Dolezal gave at the university on the politics of Black hair. The fact that she is vastly knowledgeable about the subject only indexes her as an academic. What is notable however from the perspective of racial and linguistic passing is the stance she maintains in the narration; ‘a younger, pale, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Dolezal who looks much different than the woman with caramel-colored skin now’ (Nelson 2015).
Extract 2

01:00

When it comes to hair, hair is, for Black women, much more, than just an aesthetic, much more than just and it could torment an appearance or a style and so I’m gonna go through a short synopsis, before our beautiful models walk, and then I will actually walk the, down an aisle according to where they fit on this timeline of Black hair.

01:30

So hair history and privilege, during child slavery, during the transatlantic slave trade hair styles were banned, so anyone who has an African American lineage, has a history of banned Black hairstyles, we’re gonna go, before the oppression, but first we kind of need to look at what happened to our hairstyles here in America.

In Extract 2, Rachel Dolezal takes the stance of an insider. By this, I mean that her pronominal choice as well as investment in victimology with reference to the group oppression of African Americans represents her as an insider. The interesting point to note here is that, in addition to the language, the issue that was made about her appearance underlines the essentialism of racial looks. As a White girl in her youth she had straight hair and light skin, whereas as an adult and particularly since she started passing as Black her skin tone has darkened and she wears her hair in curls and braids which she described as ‘natural’. In the lecture on Black hair, Dolezal style-shifts in order to reinforce her claim to membership of the group. In a subsequent interview, she seemed to have exploited the contemporary sympathies attracted by the transgender phenomenon to spotlight the possibility of a ‘transracial’ parallel.

Passing however has not been confined to White–Black and vice versa. White American Andrea Lee Smith, also a professor, passed for Cherokee Indian for years before she was unmasked in May 2015. From the language, race and identity point of view, Shorter (2015), commenting in the online edition of Indian Country Media Network Today, noted: ‘As all of these various cases point out, identity is in fact a confusing matter, sometimes designated by blood, other times by language, or heritage, or cultural performances’ (my emphasis). Perhaps his most incisive comment concerned the demands that professional practice may be making on academics. He notes: ‘In Indigenous Studies, we were expected to learn and help a particular community, learning language and culture when invited to do, essentially dance along the border of cultural insider and outsider’ (my emphasis).

Thus passing is not always self-serving but may be a strategy devised for a greater utilitarian purpose. It is buoyed up by the fact that the voice of an insider may be more effective and trusted in indigenous communities.

Summary

This chapter has presented a brief discussion of the controversies in a number of disciplines around the subject of race, from definition based on stereotypes to its complex constructions across various contexts. I have tried to demonstrate that interest in race in sociolinguistics and applied linguistics study stretches beyond racism discourse even though the scholarship shows that the topic has attracted more interest. The interface of race, language and identity is a site for issues of social justice, marginalisation, access and simply being by ascription and by choice among others.
Tope Omoniyi

Related topics

Historical perspectives on language and identity; Language and ethnic identity; Identity in post-colonial contexts; A linguistic ethnography of identity: adopting a heteroglossic frame; Language, gender and identities in political life: a case study from Malaysia; Styling and identity in a second language; The future of identity research: impact and new developments in sociolinguistics.

Further reading

Bucholtz, M. (2011). White kids language, race, and styles of youth identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (The monograph shows youth as a contrastive category to race and for whom identity is definitely a performance.)

Notes

1 See https://educationallinguist.wordpress.com/2015/06/14/why-we-need-raciolinguistics
2 www.english.illinois.edu/-people-/faculty/debaron/403/403%20mne/ebonics.pdf
3 www.sahistory.org.za/topic/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising
4 www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/06/12/spokane-naacp-president-rachel-dolezal-may-be-white
5 http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2015/07/01/four-words-andrea-smith-im-not-indian

References

Language, race and identity


